

The Psychology of Uncertainty in Senecan Tragedy

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Since the publication of Regenbogen's influential monograph, *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas*,¹ it has been recognized that the emphatic depiction of emotion, which distinguishes Senecan tragedy from Greek tragedy of the Classical period, is vitally connected with Seneca's Stoic world-view. Several studies have shown that the passionate characters of Senecan tragedy, in whom the absence of *ratio* or reason constitutes vice according to the Stoic view,² act as cautionary *exempla* for the instructive warning of their audience.³ Little attention, however, has been given to two aspects of Seneca's *Affektdramen*: firstly, their conspicuous emphasis on uncertainty; secondly, the *formal* methods by which the psychological dimension of Senecan characters is rendered exemplary. In what follows, I wish to address these two aspects by examining the psychology of uncertainty in conjunction with the formal means of its depiction through description.

By means of frequent and lengthy descriptions placed in the mouths of his characters, Seneca gives psychology—the portrayal of states of mind and emotion—an emphasis and importance in his tragedies which it does not have in those of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.⁴ As a result of the

¹0. Regenbogen, *Schmerz und Tod in den Tragödien Senecas*, Vorträge der Bibliothek Warburg 7 (Leipzig 1930), reprinted in *Kleine Schriften* (Munich 1961).

² For the Stoics, virtue is perfected reason—e.g. *Epp.* 66. 32; 76. 10. The *sapiens* eradicates the emotions entirely and lives in a state of *apatheia*—e.g. *Epp.* 85. 3 ff., *Ira* 1. 16. 7 ff. Cf. also E. Zeller, *The Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics*, trans. O. J. Reichel (New York 1962, reprinted from new and rev. ed. of 1879), pp. 253 ff.

³ Cf. B. Marti, "Seneca's tragedies. A new interpretation," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 76 (1945), 216–45, especially 222, 230; N. T. Pratt, "The Stoic base of Senecan drama," *ibid.* 79 (1948), 1–11; id., *Seneca's Drama* (Chapel Hill 1983), pp. 76 ff.; E. C. Evans, "A Stoic Aspect of Senecan Drama: Portraiture" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 81 (1950), 169–84; K. von Fritz, *Antike und moderne Tragödie* (Berlin 1962), p. 47.

⁴ Descriptions of emotion in Greek tragedy are usually brief and simple, e.g. Aeschylus, *Cho.* 183 ff., 211; *Pers.* 987–91; *Supp.* 379–80; Sophocles, *Ajax* 587, 794; Euripides, *Hec.* 85–86; *I. T.* 793–97. Emotion tends to be revealed implicitly or through some kind of stage-business: cf.

addition of this psychological dimension, we might expect the dramatic credibility of Seneca's characters to be enhanced. In fact, a reading of the plays quickly reveals that this is not so. As T. S. Eliot has put it: "In the plays of Seneca, the drama is all in the word, and the word has no further reality behind it. His characters all seem to speak with the same voice, and at the top of it."⁵ A remarkable number of the descriptions of emotion, and those of personal physical appearance in which emotion is manifest, portray a common psychology of uncertainty, which is unvaried by the suiting of language to character, and illustrated by the same epic similes. Seneca's extensive use of rhetorical description, with concomitant sacrifice of the development of character essential to dramatic illusion, has conventionally been explained as a necessary evil. It allows Seneca, as a dramatist writing for recitation, to compensate for the supposed absence of stage action in recitation drama⁶ by appropriating the narrative method of the epic poet.⁷ I would like to suggest, however, that this negative view, while not invalid, is incomplete. With particular attention to the portrayal of uncertainty, I wish to counter it with a more positive view of description in Senecan tragedy. It is not simply a compensatory device; it affords Seneca the

F. L. Shisler, "Portrayal of Joy in Greek Tragedy," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 73 (1942), 277-92; ead., "The Use of Stage Business to Portray Emotion in Greek Tragedy," *American Journal of Philology* 66 (1945), 377-97.

⁵ *Seneca: His Tenne Tragedies*, ed. Thomas Newton with intro. by T. S. Eliot (London 1927), p. ix.

⁶ Whether or not Senecan drama was destined for stage performance is one of the central debates of Senecan scholarship. It is unlikely to be resolved given the paucity of our knowledge of the circumstances of recitation. The ancient evidence is collected by J. E. B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal*, vol. 1 (New York 1901), pp. 173 ff. Far too little attention, however, has been given by studies which attempt to resolve the question (e.g. O. Zwierlein, *Die Rezitationsdramen Senecas*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 20 [Meisenheim am Glan 1966]) to what is meant by "performance" and how it differs in its essentials from "recitation." All that can be reasonably postulated about the production (actual or intended) of Senecan tragedy is that it did not take place in the manner of a spectacle for a mass plebeian audience. Seneca's social status and express distaste for such amusements make it unlikely: cf. *Epp.* 7. 2 ff., L. Friedlaender, *Roman Life and Manners under the Early Empire*, trans. J. H. Freese & L. A. Magnus (London 1936, reprinted from 7th enl. and rev. ed. of 1908), vol. 2, pp. 90 ff. But there is evidence for recitation in theaters: cf. Mayor, *ibid.*, p. 179. If, as C. J. Herington, "Senecan Tragedy," *Arion* 5 (1966), 422-71, reprinted in *Essays on Classical Literature*, ed. N. Rudd (Cambridge 1972), pp. 444 ff., so cogently argues, such recitations involved more than one reciter, and given that any reciter, trained in the art of *prœnuntiatio* (*Ad Herenn.* III. 11. 19 ff.), would have found it quite instinctive to move and gesture as he spoke, the essential difference between "recitation" and "performance" becomes very fine.

⁷ Cf. Zwierlein, *op. cit.* (above, note 6), p. 60: "Die pedantische Beschreibung . . . musste einem Zuschauer, der dies ja selbst sähe, albern erscheinen; dem Hörer kann sie helfen, sich das Bild plastisch vorzustellen." Cf. also E. Fantham, *Seneca's Troades: A Literary Introduction with Text, Translation, and Commentary* (Princeton 1982), index s.vv. "description of what would have been shown on stage" and ead., "Virgil's Dido and Seneca's Heroines," *Greece & Rome* 22 (1975), 3, n. 3.

formal means to advance a moral message in drama. Through it the characters are presented, tacitly, as *exempla of inconstantia*.

The Stoic conception of perfect virtue, embodied in the sage or *sapiens*, is one of *constantia*—complete constancy of action and thought.⁸ Unshaken by any emotions, “certus iudicii, inconcussus, intrepidus” (*Epp.* 45. 9), the *sapiens* of Seneca’s philosophical prose works is constantly contrasted with the morally imperfect, whose susceptibility to emotion means that their thoughts and actions are characterized by uncertainty or *inconstantia*. Hence it is that the protagonists of Senecan tragedy, many of whom are, or will be, guilty of crimes as heinous as murder and incest, are invested with a psychology of uncertainty.

Their *inconstantia* often manifests itself particularly before and during wrongdoing. A scene in which the heroine urges herself to be fixed in her criminal purpose is common to the *Medea* (893 ff.), *Phaedra* (592 ff.), *Agamemnon* (139 ff.) and *Hercules Oetaeus* (307 ff.).⁹ At the actual moment of murdering Agamemnon, the uncertainty of the two culprits, Atreus and Clytemnestra, is described to us in prophetic hallucination by Cassandra (*Ag.* 890–91, 897–900.):

haurit trementi semivir dextra latus,
nec penitus egit: vulnere in medio stupet.
.....
armat bipenni Tyndaris dextram furens,
qualisque ad aras colla taurorum prius
designat oculis antequam ferro petat,
sic huc et illuc impiam librat manum.

Thyestes, who, as we are told at the beginning of the play of that name (37), has been exiled for his crimes, returns to Argos with his ambition for kingly power undiminished. As he does so, his uncertainty is graphically described both by himself and by his son Tantalus (*Thy.* 419–20, 421–22, 434–39):

revolvor: animus haeret ac retro cupit
corpus referre, moveo nolentem gradum.

Pigro (quid hoc est?) genitor incessu stupet
vultumque versat seque in incerto tenet.

⁸ The model for this concept of virtue is the constancy and eternity of God which, as primary fire, will alone survive the cyclical conflagrations bringing about the end of the world: cf. Zeller, *op. cit.* (above note 2), pp. 164 ff. For similarity between the *sapiens* and God, cf. *Prov.* 1. 5, 6. 4; *Epp.* 73. 11, *Const. Sap.* 8. 2.

⁹ The authenticity of the *Hercules Oetaeus* as a Senecan play has been questioned: cf., e.g., W. H. Friedrich, “Sprache und Stil des Hercules Oetaeus,” *Hermes* 82 (1954), 51–84, and B. Axelson, *Korruptelenkult: Studien zur Textkritik der unechten Seneca-Tragödie*, Scripta minora Reg. Soc. Human. Litt. Lund. (Lund 1967). I include it for examination here as I find that the psychology and description of uncertainty plays a similar role in it to that noted in the other Senecan tragedies.

Causam timoris ipse quam ignoro exigis.
 nihil timendum video, sed timeo tamen.
 placet ire, pigris membra sed genibus labant,
 alioque quam quo nitor abductus feror.
 sic concitatam remige et velo ratem
 aestus resistens remigi et velo refert.

Most emphatically uncertain of crimes is Atreus' murder of his brother's sons (*Thy.* 707 ff.):

ieiuna silvis qualis in Gangeticis
 inter iuencos tigris erravit duos,
 utriusque praedae cupida quo primum ferat
 incerta morsus (flectit hoc rictus suos,
 illo reflectit et famem dubiam tenet),
 sic durus Atreus capita devota impiae
 speculatur irac. quem prius mactet sibi
 dubitat, secunda deinde quem caede immolet.
 nec interest—sed dubitat et saevum scelus
 iuvat ordinare.

The uncertainty which Senecan characters display both before and at the moment of wrongdoing is explained very clearly by a passage in Seneca's seventy-fourth epistle: "Hoc enim stultitiae proprium quis dixerit, ignave et contumaciter facere quae faciat, et alio corpus inpellere, alio animum, distrahique inter diversissimos motus" (*Epp.* 74. 32). It is just this disjunction of body and mind which we have seen Thyestes show as he approaches Argos (*Thy.* 419–20, 421–22, 434–39). Similarly, when Phaedra wishes to confess her incestuous love to Hippolytus, she finds herself physically incapable of uttering the words (*Phaed.* 602–03). Like Thyestes, she is impelled in two different directions by body and mind.

The uncertainty of Seneca's tragic characters is often described figuratively with images. Among these, the most common is that used by Thyestes to describe the physical symptoms of his uncertainty: a ship driven off course by a turbulent sea (*Thy.* 438–39). Clytemnestra and Phaedra also compare their uncertainty to the tossing of a ship on a turbulent sea (*Ag.* 138–43; *Phaed.* 179–83):

fluctibus variis agor,
 ut, cum hinc profundum ventus, hinc aestus rapit,
 incerta dubitat unda cui cedat malo.
 proinde omisi regimen e manibus meis:
 quocumque me ira, quo dolor, quo spes feret,
 hoc ire pergam; fluctibus dedimus ratem.

vadit animus in praeceps sciens
 remeatque frustra sana consilia appetens.
 sic, cum gravatam navita adversa ratem

propellit unda, cedit in vanum labor
et victa prono puppis aufertur vado.

Medea and Deianira, like Clytemnestra (*Ag.* 138–40), compare their uncertainty to the turbulence of the sea itself (*Med.* 939–43; *Herc. Oet.* 710–12)

anceps aestus incertam rapit,
ut saeva rapidi bella cum venti gerunt
utrimque fluctus maria discordes agunt
dubiumque fervet pelagus, haut aliter meum
cor fluctuatur.

ut fractus austro pontus etiamnum tumet,
quamvis quiescat languidis ventis dies,
ita mens adhuc vexatur excusso metu.

Such imagery closely reflects that with which Seneca illustrates *inconstantia* in his prose works. Like many ancient philosophers, Seneca often appropriates commonplace imagery for the illustration of philosophical doctrine.¹⁰ Like his Stoic predecessor, Chrysippus, he finds the common poetic analogy between a ship tossed on a turbulent sea a useful one in illustrating the uncertain condition of the morally imperfect.¹¹ At *Cons. Polyb.* 9. 6, for example, he describes mankind in these words:

In hoc profundum inquietumque proiecti mare, alternis aestibus
reciprocum et modo adlevans nos subitis incrementis, modo maioribus
damnis deferens adsidueque iactans, numquam stabili consistimus
loco, pendemus et fluctuamur et alter in alterum inlidimur et aliquando
nafragium facimus, semper timemus.

Sometimes, as at *Brev. Vit.* 2. 3, he compares the sinful, tortured by their emotions, to the tossing sea itself:

Urgent et circumstant vitia . . . si quando aliqua fortuito quies
contigit, velut profundum mare, in quo post ventum quoque volutatio
est, fluctuantur, nec umquam illis a cupiditatibus suis otium est.

In the light of the moral significance attached by Seneca in his prose works to the image of the tossing sea and ship, the moral significance of the same imagery in his tragedies becomes clear. Whether characters compare their uncertainty to the tossing of a ship on a turbulent sea, as Clytemnestra, Phaedra and Thyestes do, or whether they compare themselves to the turbulent sea itself, as Medea and Deianira, their imagery “brands” their uncertainty as the *inconstantia* of Stoic (and Senecan) conception.

¹⁰ Cf. my Ph.D. thesis, “The Imagery of Morality in Seneca’s Prose-Works” (McMaster University 1985), Part. II.

¹¹ Cf., e.g., Plutarch, *Mor.* 450d (= *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. H. von Arnim III. 390, p. 95, 10–13); *Mor.* 454a–b, 453f–454a; Epictetus, *Diss.* 2. 18. 29, 4. 3. 4.

There are few virtuous characters in Senecan tragedy, but in one case at least, the certainty of the virtuous is contrasted with the uncertainty of the morally imperfect in terms of the same sea and ship imagery. As he confronts the monster which will bring about his death, Hippolytus is compared by a messenger to a helmsman who holds his ship steady on a turbulent sea (*Phaed.* 1072–75):

at ille, qualis turbido rector mari
ratem retentat, ne det obliquum latus,
et arte fluctum fallit, haud aliter citos
currus gubernat.

Such imagery should remind us that, in his prose works, Seneca personifies Philosophy as a helmsman who “sedet ad gubernaculum et per ancipitia fluctuantium derigit cursum” (*Epp.* 16. 3). Similarly, exhorting Marcia to display Stoic *apatheia* amidst adversity, Seneca cries (*Cons. Marc.* 6. 3):

regamur nec nos ista vis transversos auferat. Turpis est navigii rector
cui gubernacula fluctus eripuit, qui fluviantia vela deseruit, permisit
tempestati ratem; at ille vel in naufragio laudandus quem obruit mare
clavum tenentem et obnixum.

The image of Hippolytus as a steadfast helmsman paints his courage in Stoic colors as the *constantia* of the *sapiens*, and places it in sharp contrast to the *inconstantia* of the characters who have compared their uncertainty to the uncontrollable tossing of a ship.

The lengthy analyses of their emotion, illustrated with epic similes, with which Senecan characters provide us, do not, as many have observed, have the ring of truth.¹² Apart from the fact that they all depict a similar state of uncertainty, their clinical objectivity and rhetorical elaboration are quite at odds with the kind of utterances we should expect from those undergoing the emotional turmoil described in them. Moreover, in light of the moral significance attached to the imagery with which they illustrate their feelings, it is clear that, with such descriptions, Senecan characters are made to condemn themselves unwittingly with consequent irony. Such description is most satisfactorily explained, therefore—to borrow a term from Tacitean scholarship—as a kind of authorial “innuendo,”¹³ by which Seneca, the dramatist, contrives to pass tacit comment on the moral significance of his characters and their actions. With complete disregard for the dramatic credibility of his characters, Seneca places in their mouths the kind of psychological description ornamented with similes with which, if he were an epic poet, he would provide his reader in his own person. Thus

¹² E.g. F. Leo, *De Senecae Tragoediis Observationes Criticae* (Berlin 1878: repr., Berlin 1963), pp. 147 ff.; J. W. Duff, *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age: from Tiberius to Hadrian*, 3rd ed. (London 1964), p. 208, and cf. T. S. Eliot (above, note 5).

¹³ I. S. Ryberg, “Tacitus and the Art of Authorial Innuendo,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 73 (1942), 383–404.

when Ovid describes the uncertainty of Althaea before wrongdoing, he does so with the same analytical detail and elaborate image that Seneca's heroines use to describe themselves (*Met.* VIII. 465–474):

Saepe metu sceleris pallebant ora futuri,
 saepe suum fervens oculis dabat ira ruborem;
 et modo nescio quid similis crudele minanti
 vultus erat, modo quem misereri credere posses;
 cumque ferus lacrimas animi siccaverat ardor,
 inveniabantur lacrimae tamen. utque carina,
 quam ventus ventoque rapit contrarius aestus,
 vim geminam sentit, paretque incerta duobus:
 Thestias haud aliter dubiis affectibus errat,
 perque vices ponit positamque resuscitat iram.

If the effect of Seneca's tragedies depended on the primarily aural effects of recitation,¹⁴ description of emotion, and, more obviously, description of physical appearance in which emotion is manifest, would clearly perform a useful function in conveying to the audience meaning which might otherwise be expressed by stage action. However, I have shown that such description serves a more positive function in Senecan tragedy: it invests the characters involved with the characteristics of *inconstantia*. As such, we may compare it not only in purpose, but also in its narrative form, to the rhetorical device known as *characterismos*, the philosophical utility of which Seneca describes in his ninety-fifth epistle.¹⁵ This device, as he explains there (*Epp.* 95. 65), is a description of the *signa* and *notae*, the signs and marks, which characterize virtue and vice, for the purpose of moral instruction. In his words (*Epp.* 95. 66):

Haec res eandem vim habet quam praecipere; nam qui praecipit dicit
 "illa facies si voles temperans esse," qui describit ait "temperans est
 qui illa facit, qui illis abstinet." Quæris quid intersit? Alter praecepta
 virtutis dat, alter exemplar. Descriptiones has et, ut publicanorum
 utar verbo, iconismos ex usu esse confiteor: proponamus laudanda,
 inveniatur imitator.

The repetitious description of uncertainty, underpinned by recurrent imagery, which Seneca places in the mouths of many of his characters, renders them apotroptic *characterismoi* of *inconstantia*. It exemplifies Seneca's appropriation of the narrative author's privilege to pass judgment on the thoughts and actions of his characters with a view to instructing his audience in the manner of a philosopher.

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¹⁴ But whether the effects of recitation were primarily aural is not certain: cf. above, note 6.

¹⁵ Cf. E. C. Evans (above, note 3), 169–84.

